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INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 1698
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 2143
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 5070
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 5176
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 8772
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 6344
RUEHCN/AMCONSUL CHENGDU 1663
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 1977
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA 0511
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RUEATRS/DEPT OF TREASURY WASHDC
RUEKJCS/DIA WASHDC
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 4187
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 2166
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RANGOON 000014

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MLS, INR/EAP, INR/B
DEPT PASS TO USDA
DEPT PASS TO USAID
PACOM FOR FPA
TREASURY FOR OASIA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/08/2019
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [EAGR](#) [ECON](#) [BM](#)
SUBJECT: BURMA MINISTER OF AGRICULTURE ON POLITICAL
EVOLUTION, CYCLONE RELIEF, AND AGRICULTURE ISSUES

REF: 08 RANGOON 643

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Classified By: Economic Officer Samantha A. Carl-Yoder for Reasons 1.4
(b and d).

Summary

11. (C) During a January 5 meeting with the Charge, Burma's Minister of Agriculture and Secretary General of the mass-member Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) Major General Htay Oo discussed the upcoming 2010 elections, suggesting it is time for generational change and saying youth must play an active role in Burma's future. The Minister declined to state outright whether he would run for office but hinted that his organization, which strives for a "prosperous Burma" would participate in the elections. The Minister also discussed the GOB's ongoing Cyclone Nargis relief and recovery efforts at length and his plans to boost agricultural production through the construction of advanced irrigation networks. End Summary.

Towards a "Prosperous" Future

12. (C) During a January 5 meeting in Nay Pyi Taw, the Charge asked Minister Htay Oo about the 2010 elections, given wide-spread rumors that the USDA -- a government-mandated "social" organization with over 25 million members -- will become a formal political party. The Minister, who in the past had declined to discuss politics with embassy officials (Reftel), openly engaged. He said the military government, working with various organizations including USDA, had

succeeded in establishing peace and stability in Burma. Elections are the next step for ensuring Burma's prosperity. He claimed USDA is an organization with no enemies. It believes in uniting the people of Burma through cooperation. While the Minister did not directly answer the Charge's inquiry about the role of the USDA or the Minister in the upcoming election, Htay Oo hinted that USDA, with its mandate to assist the Burmese people through the development of social services and infrastructure, would participate in some form.

¶3. (C) Htay Oo spoke of generational change in the GOB, saying there is a time for people to leave government, and that youth should play a role in determining the future of Burma. Future leaders of Burma need to be able to communicate with the outside world, he declared. The Charge noted that development should be a top priority of any government, but he emphasized that Burma's citizens should play a decisive role in governance, including in making development decisions. The Burmese must be able to express their views openly without fear of retribution and to participate in free and fair elections.

¶4. (C) The Charge raised wide-spread allegations of USDA participation in violent acts against the political opposition and urged the Minister to ensure that his organization actually does only partake in constructive activities that benefit the people of Burma. The Minister acknowledged that in a large organization some members may err, but he reiterated that USDA's purpose and intention is simply to serve the people with no intention to attack the political opposition.

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Promoting Agricultural Development

¶5. (C) Minister Htay Oo and his Agricultural Planning staff provided the Charge with a detailed explanation of the Ministry's programs to promote agricultural development. The Ministry's mandate is to improve the livelihoods of Burma's farmers, who account for roughly 60 percent of the population. In the past few years, agricultural production of rice, beans and pulses, and cotton has increased dramatically, benefiting farmers. Htay Oo stated that, despite Cyclone Nargis, Burma's overall rice production yields in 2008 were similar to 2007 quantities. Although overall rice production in the Delta was lower, albeit by only 2-3 percent, other areas, such as Mandalay and Sagaing Divisions, had shown increased production. In 2008, Burmese farmers planted approximately 10,000 fewer acres of rice than in 2007, but yields were roughly the same. As Burma now has a market-based system for most crops, though not yet for rice, farmers in many instances are able to buy and sell without government control, thus earning more in profits, Director General of Agricultural Planning Tin Htut Oo explained.

¶6. (C) According to Tin Htut Oo, Burma has an abundance of fertile land available for farming particularly in Sagaing and Magwe Divisions, but must first improve its irrigation networks. The GOB has already constructed plenty of dams throughout the country, and now must link the reservoirs to the farm land - the Ministry's latest project. (Note: Immediately before the meeting with the Charge, Htay Oo had met with Secretary-1 and the Minister of Planning to review the Ag Ministry's latest budget request to fund irrigation networks. The meeting had lasted for five hours, delaying Charge's session with Htay Oo to the evening. End note.)

Ongoing Nargis Recovery Efforts

¶7. (C) Htay Oo thanked the Charge for the USG's assistance for Cyclone Nargis, and explained the GOB's ongoing plans to

improve infrastructure and economic conditions in the Delta. The Ministry of Agriculture, with USDA assistance, already made temporary fixes to 41 embankments in the Delta; provided seeds, machinery, and other inputs to affected farmers; and conducted an agricultural assessment of the cyclone-affected area. Htay Oo discussed future plans, which include the construction of five new roads to connect areas in the Delta; building of 18 cyclone shelters in schools, hospitals, and offices; and strengthening of existing embankments to prevent future flooding. He inquired whether the USG could fund the construction of homes, at a cost of approximately USD 600 each, or contribute to embankment reinforcement. The Charge noted that such reconstruction efforts would be more palatable for international donors if Burma's governance and human rights issues can be resolved.

Ministry Views on the TCG

18. (C) When the Charge asked Htay Oo his opinion of the Tripartite Core Group (TCG), the Minister merely noted it seems to be useful in post-Nargis relief. Separately, Ministry staff privately expressed quite positive personal views on the TCG. Deputy Director General of Agricultural Planning Than Aye, the Agricultural Ministry's representative

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on the TCG, lauded the TCG's efforts to facilitate Delta recovery. He indicated that the TCG has provided an opportunity for members of the GOB, who tend to be isolated, to interact with the UN, ASEAN, and the international community. Director General of Planning Tin Htut Oo commented that the TCG has been useful for establishing a degree of trust between the international community and the GOB on cyclone relief. Than Aye noted that different GOB Ministers have diverging views on the TCG; some, such as Htay Oo, see it as a way to separate politics from humanitarian assistance. Others are not so enthusiastic, apparently concerned about losing control over decisions and preferring to deal with donors on a ministry-by-ministry basis.

Comment

19. (C) Minister Htay Oo's staff indicated that he is interested in politics and is quite open-minded to new ideas. Rumors abound that he will resign as Minister of Agriculture so he can form a political party with his USDA as the base. In the meeting, he was relatively forthcoming about the coming elections, although he evaded direct questions about whether he will participate. It was quite surprising that he raised the need for generational change in the GOB, especially since Htay Oo, in his 50s, reportedly has a close relationship with Senior General Than Shwe, the older generation, who has thus far kept a firm grip on power.

110. (C) The Minister's responses to direct inquiries were cagey, but his demeanor throughout the conversation was affable. While he clearly understands English and his staff said he speaks it well, he used an interpreter for responses. Reading between the lines, we surmise that Htay Oo sees himself as a next-generation person who can help lead Burma into the future. As the meeting concluded, he noted that he would be receptive to further conversations with Charge.

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